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Review of Modernism and the Marketplace: Literary Culture and Consumer Capitalism in Rhys, Woolf, Stein, and Nella Larsen by Alissa G. Karl

Citation for published version:

Crosthwaite, P 2010, 'Review of Modernism and the Marketplace: Literary Culture and Consumer Capitalism in Rhys, Woolf, Stein, and Nella Larsen by Alissa G. Karl', *Space and Culture*.
<<http://www.spaceandculture.org/2010/08/13/book-review-modernism-and-the-marketplace>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Space and Culture

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Book Review: Modernism and the Marketplace

Alissa G. Karl. [Modernism and the Marketplace: Literary Culture and Consumer Capitalism in Rhys, Woolf, Stein, and Nella Larsen](#). 2009. New York: Routledge. 183 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-98141-5

Reviewed by [Paul Crosthwaite](#), [English Literature Research Group](#), [Cardiff University](#) (UK)

This outstanding study explores the engagement of Anglo-American women writers of the modernist period with a global capitalist system increasingly orientated towards the consumption of desirable commodities. Situating the authors she analyzes against a meticulously sketched backdrop of early twentieth-century socio-economic history in Britain and the United States, Alissa Karl shows how long-prevailing theorizations of modernist culture as high-mindedly antagonistic towards the vulgar machinations of the marketplace (such as those associated with Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School) misrepresent the ambiguous blend of attraction and repulsion that characterizes many modernist encounters with the seductions of consumer capitalism.



Window shopping at Marshall Fields, Chicago, 1910

One of the chief strengths of Karl's book is its insistence on approaching commodity consumption not as an autonomous activity contained by the four walls of the grocer's shop or department store, but as an economic phenomenon inextricably woven into the global capitalist network and determined by an array of power structures. In the introduction, Karl describes how her thinking on these issues evolved over the course of her research:

When I began this project, I set out to examine the conceptualization, function, and impact of consumer capitalism in women-authored modernist texts I soon discovered that it was not possible to discuss adequately the ideologies and operations of consumerism without considering the ways that consumerism and modernism alike interfaced with procedures of capitalist economies more broadly, with the classed hierarchies that organize capitalist cultures, with shifting but still active nation- and empire-building, and with racial and ethnic dynamics of societies in demographic flux." (4)

The four chapters that follow make good on the ambitious terms of the project's remit. The first chapter considers how the fiction of Jean Rhys registers the ways in which "consumerism links the evolving strategies of actual colonization (economic, military, political) with those of the metaphorical (but no less material or real) colonization of women's bodies through commodification, fetishization, and visual appropriation" (17). Karl shows how Rhys' heroines – émigrés to London or Paris from colonized territories or other exotic locales – attempt to utilize consumption and display in order to fashion what they imagine to be metropolitan identities; the effect, however, is to turn themselves into commodities to be possessed and exchanged by domineering, paternalistic men. The book then turns to Virginia Woolf, to examine the co-construction of consumerism and imperialism in *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Here, Karl argues that Woolf sees the practices of British imperial domination as not merely confined to the upper social echelons – in the exercise of state and corporate power – but as continually replicated and intensified 'on the ground' in the everyday consumption of goods that bear the imprint of distant exploitation. Woolf's response, however, is a complex – and symptomatic – combination of complicity and critique.

Chapter 3 analyses two prominent memoirs of modernist literary culture: Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare and Company* (1956). Karl skilfully articulates the ways in which Stein, the avant-garde poet, and Beach, the pioneering bookseller and publisher who first brought James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) into print, did not simply reject the consumer marketplace, but rather challenged a standardized mass culture from within the market itself, positioning their wares as radical, daring commodities for a discerning, niche audience. The final chapter focuses on Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand*, the loosely autobiographical tale of an American woman of white European and black West Indian parentage. Karl argues compellingly that Larsen's protagonist, Helga, uses consumerism as a strategy through which "to negotiate the discrepancies of racial identification and class positioning in order to forge a unique position for herself" (120). Commodities and consumerism "appear to offer the latitude of choice against the economic formations of race" (120), but, proving in fact to be inseparable from rigidly hierarchical social structures, they turn out to merely embed Helga's predetermined place on the social scale.

Drawing on the detailed readings of modernist texts offered in her four chapters, Karl's concluding Coda makes persuasive and intriguing connections to contemporary culture, indicating how many of today's anxieties and debates about consumption, commodification, branding, and corporate power were rehearsed during the modernist period, and asserting a strong case for the relevance of modernist texts in understanding the intoxicating and troubling consumer landscape of the twenty-first century.

As Karl notes in her introduction, there has been a recent turn in modernist studies towards "geography and transnationalism," a turn which troubles "the national and temporal parameters of modernism" (3). *Modernism and the Marketplace*, with its deftly rendered panorama of globalized economic relations and spatially expansive modernist texts, makes a brilliant contribution to this vibrant field of study. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel write influentially of modernism's "geocultural consciousness" (qtd. in Karl 4); Karl's book provides one of the best analyses yet of this mode of writing, thought, and experience.

Works Cited

Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Eds.) 2005. [Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity](#). Bloomington: Indiana UP.